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ABSTRACT

Findings of a paper that examined the effect of different attendance policies on student attendance and achievement are presented in this paper. Analysis of class records of 401 college students enrolled in four child development courses taught from fall 1989 to spring 1990 indicated that there were significantly more absences if attendance was not required, and that there was a modest negative correlation between the number of absences and class grade average. The "not required explicit" policy, which explicitly states that attendance is not required and explains the correlation of absences with lower grades, is recommended because it allows students to make informed decisions and simplifies the teacher's work. Two tables are included. (LMI)

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The Effect of Different Attendance Policies on Student Attendance and Achievement

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Abstract

Many instructors "know" that without a formal attendance policy students will be absent frequently and will do poorly in class. Yet little, if any, research exists to justify this belief. A study of 401 students enrolled in Child Development courses over a four term period found that there were significantly more absences if attendance was not required, and that there was a modest negative correlation between absences and class average. Implications of these findings for classroom management will be discussed.

For most of my 12 years of teaching I have had a formal attendance policy in all of my courses. This was done more out of habit than out of conviction. Two events recently conspired to cause me to question and change my own policy.

At a gathering of colleagues the discussion turned to attendance policies. What struck me was that advocates of each policy (counting attendance in determining students' grades and not counting it) both agreed that: (1) students will be disinclined to attend classes if they are not required to do so; and (2) students who are frequently absent will do poorly. Although both statements may seem perfectly sensible, they are in fact unproven assumptions. (A search of Teaching of Psychology revealed no articles which addressed the effects of attendance policies.)

Shortly after this discussion occurred I was faced with teaching a highly resistant class; students arrived late and left early, were inattentive, and acted out. I began to wonder what was being gained by forcing them to be there, and resolved not to require attendance in future courses. I also decided to examine the effect of an attendance policy on students' attendance and achievement, as well as assessing students' attitudes about attendance policies. This paper will address the first two issues.

Methods

The subjects were the 401 students who completed my Child Development course in Fall 1989 through Spring 1990. In Fall 1989 I had an explicit attendance requirement in all three sections (N = 106). Students were informed both in writing and verbally that they were permitted a maximum of three absences with no penalty,

nine or more absences would result in automatic failure, and if they had between four and eight absences their grades might be lowered at my discretion (Required Explicit).

In the Spring and Fall 1990 I did not require attendance of the students in my five sections (N = 183) and I did not take attendance into account in determining their final grades. I did not specifically inform students of this policy, I simply made no mention of requiring attendance (Not Required Implicit). If asked, however, I did explain that attendance was not required.

In Spring 1991 students in my three sections (N=111) were informed both in writing and verbally that attendance would not be counted in determining their final grades, and that if they did come to class they were expected to be prepared and attentive. I emphasized that to get the most out of the course they should attend regularly, but added that the decision to do so rested with them (Not Required Explicit). Regardless of the particular policy in effect I took attendance in each class every day.

The principal method of evaluation in all sections were four non-cumulative multiple choice tests. The same exams were used during all four semesters (students were not permitted to keep the exams). Course achievement is defined in this study as each student's average on the four tests.

Students in all sections completed an anonymous course evaluation which included a number of questions regarding their understanding of, and attitude towards, the existing attendance policy. However, these results will not be presented in detail at this time.

Results and Discussion

The first question I asked is whether students will be disinclined to attend class if they are not required to do so. A one-way analysis of variance revealed a significant effect for attendance policy, $F(2) = 6.37$, $p = .002$. Post-hoc analysis revealed significant differences between the Required Explicit and Not Required Explicit groups, $t(1) = 3.44$, $p = .001$ and between the Not Required Implicit and Not Required Explicit groups, $t(1) = 2.67$, $p < .01$.

It seems that many of the Not Required Implicit students assumed that attendance was required, since I failed to state otherwise. Results from the anonymous course evaluation support this. Fifty percent of the students in the Not Required Implicit classes were unaware of my attendance policy, compared with only 6% in the Not Required Explicit classes, and 88% in the Required Explicit classes. It is heartening to learn that students do assume they are expected to attend class unless they are specifically told otherwise. However, of the 26 students who had nine or more absences (my cut-off for automatic failure in the Required Explicit classes) only one was in a Required Explicit class, eight were in a Not Required Implicit class, and 17 were in a Not Required Explicit class. Thus, the "worst offenders" in terms of absences were much less likely to be in a Required Explicit class than one of the others. Table 1 provides a complete breakdown of the number of students in each attendance policy that were absent a given number of times.

The second question I posed is whether attendance affects

achievement. A one-way ANOVA revealed that attendance policy did not have a significant effect on achievement, $F(2) = 2.82$, $p = .059$. However, actual number of absences (regardless of attendance policy) was negatively correlated with achievement, $r(399) = -.33$, $p < .001$, accounting for 10.7% of the variance in achievement (see Table 2). Of course, this relation could be due to the confounding effect of a third variable, such as motivation.

In general, it seems that common sense was supported; if students were not required to attend class they were less likely to do so, and if they were absent frequently they were less likely to do well in the class. Of course, the effect of attendance on achievement can no doubt be manipulated by structuring the tests to emphasize or de-emphasize material covered in class. It is interesting that the tests these students took were heavily slanted to emphasize the textbook. In fact, the answer to every test question could be found in the book. If this were not the case, the effect of attendance on achievement may have been even more dramatic.

Although these results may alert us to the possible effects of different attendance policies, it is still possible for reasonable people to disagree on the best approach. I have continued with the Not Required Explicit policy although I now describe the results of this study to my students so that they can make informed decisisons about attending or not. I do this for two main reasons: (1) I believe that it is better for students in the long run, and (2) It has made my life as a teacher easier.

Table 1

Frequency of Student Absences by Attendance Policy

		Attendance Policy		
		Required	Not Required Implicit	Not Required Explicit
Number of Absences	0	9	22	12
	1	26	27	19
	2	22	31	18
	3	16	29	9
	4	11	25	11
	5	8	18	10
	6	3	10	5
	7	5	10	7
	8	5	4	3
	9	0	4	5
	10	0	1	2
	11	1	1	3
	12	0	1	3
	13	0	0	1
	14	0	1	1
	15	0	0	1
	16	0	0	1
	Total (N=401)	106	184	111

Table 2

Number of Absences by Level of Achievement

Final Course Average	Number of Students	Mean Number of Absences	Standard Deviation
0-59	32	5.4	3.2
60-69	76	4.4	3.1
70-79	140	3.6	3.1
80-89	128	2.7	2.2
90-100	25	1.6	1.6